

## *Commentary on The American Elections*

***“The American Elections: November 2, 2004”  
H.E. Frank Lavin, US Ambassador to Singapore  
3 November 2004  
SGX Auditorium***

On 3 November, while the results of the 2004 US presidential polls are still being called, SIIA had Ambassador Frank Lavin, American Ambassador to Singapore to share with SIIA's 200 invited guests at the SGX Centre his reading and insights about the election.

Ambassador Lavin declared that he, as a republican, was optimistic regarding the re-election of President Bush and that the incoming results confirmed his confidence. While it was still too soon to announce a final winner of the election, there were some tendencies that could be highlighted.

In the US electoral system, votes are distributed among the states according to population density. Because of this, the states with high population density, and hence many electoral votes, are always of significant importance to the presidential candidates. The distribution of popular and electoral votes were in favour of President Bush, and the races for the seats in the senate and the house, as well as the governor positions, all showed republican progress. The number of states that had favoured the democrats in the 1996 election had been gradually reduced during the 2000 and the 2004 elections. While this election had been close, it was no historical exception since the winning percentage averaged 52.15% in presidential elections from 1948 to 2000. The larger margin in electoral votes to Bush in this election compared to the one in 2000 was largely due to a collapse of the Nader support. This according to him served to debunk the general perception that the American polity is especially deeply divided since 2000, and hence referred to as a 50-50 nation.

Looking at the demographic breakdown of the exit polls, Ambassador Lavin stressed that white Americans slightly favoured Bush while African Americans largely favoured Kerry and that even though Latinos and Asians also favoured Kerry, Bush had made good progress with the Latino population. Kerry was clearly the favourite in households with union members, but since only approximately 25% of the population were registered in unions, it did not matter much in the end. The people with an annual income below \$50,000 supported Kerry, while those with an income above \$50,000 favoured Bush. Regarding religion, Ambassador Lavin pointed out that in Kerry's own segment, the Catholic, Bush actually had greater support.

According to issues, the exit polls showed that people generally think that Kerry would handle a greater number of issues better than Bush, but these issues are lower in their priority of concerns. They are, however, more concerned about the issues that they generally think Bush would handle better, namely terrorism and the situation in Iraq. Considering the candidates' personality and character, Ambassador Lavin pointed out that only on the question of empathy, intelligence and expression is Kerry perceived more favourably. Going into the electoral debates, the republican side knew that Kerry was perceived as more articulate than Bush and that Kerry was likely to be declared a winner of these debates. They also knew, however, that studies had shown that the impression of such electoral debates usually dissipate within two weeks.

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The economy and unemployment were core issues in the presidential campaigns and while it seems the states with lower unemployment rates did support Bush, there was no strong correlation. George W. Bush's bid for re-election is placed on the upward cycle of the economy just as Bill Clinton's in 1996, but unlike Bush senior's in 1992.

After the presidential election in 2000 there was a lot of debate about the Nader factor. Ambassador Lavin pointed to the insignificance of the Nader votes compared to the Bush margin in this election. In none of the states that Bush had won and where Nader featured on the ballot, were the Nader votes enough to affect the overall result.

Ambassador Lavin concluded the commentary by looking at the largest swing states and what he called the 9/11-factor. Just as the issues of terrorism and the situation in Iraq had been considered of great importance in the exit polls, it could be expected that the people directly affected by the 9/11 attacks would support Bush. This could be the explanation for why New Jersey, Connecticut and New York all featured on the list of states with the greatest Bush swings.

The question and answer session was opened with a question concerning the prospect for change in foreign policy, especially regarding Iraq, in light of the likely re-election of Bush. This theme featured prominently throughout the entire session. Ambassador Lavin said that the re-election should not be seen as a blanket endorsement of all policies, no matter how big the winning margin would turn out to be. Hence changes in policies can be expected.

The situation in Iraq was likely to improve. Ambassador Lavin predicted that the re-election of Bush would disillusion the insurgents and limit their grounds for recruitment, and that the approaching elections in Iraq would keep the general Iraqi population from resorting to violence. He further said that his government had initiated an unprecedented policy towards the Middle East and that he was anxious to see how the programme of bringing democracy and human rights to the region would play out in the next presidential term. Ambassador Lavin stated that he saw structures in Iran similar to those in Iraq; attempts to build up nuclear capabilities and weapons of mass destruction, and that the US should be concerned when the Iranian rulers issued official statements threatening the US. Regarding the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, Ambassador Lavin regretted that Arafat had not signed the agreement reached under the Clinton presidency that would have given the Palestinians a homeland. He was furthermore anxious to see how smooth the transition of leadership in the Palestinian camp would take place in light of the competitive context.

A concern was raised about the absence of the Israel-Palestinian issues in the debates prior to the election. Ambassador Lavin pointed out that the debates only gave a sense of who the candidates are, and are by no means exhaustive. He said that not even China or North Korea had been mentioned in the debates and that the lack of attention granted to an issue in the debates did not mean that it would not be considered a policy issue. Furthermore, the Ambassador said that the foreign policy towards North Korea would have been the same regardless of who won the election. Both Bush and Kerry wanted to engage North Korea, and deal with the issues of nuclear weapons; it was only a matter of strategy i.e. multilateral or bilateral talks.

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A question concerning the Democrats' reaction to the election, and especially Hillary Clinton's, was raised.. Ambassador Lavin said that there were two extremely happy people in the world today; Tony Blair and Hillary Clinton. He added that Hillary Clinton had the required celebrity status and breed to make her a frontrunner. It is, however, still unclear whether she will actually decide to run for president. Indications towards such a decision will not be seen straight away, but probably from the beginning of next year.

An American, based in Singapore, asked whether Bush could be expected to attempt to mend some of the rifts his policies has caused between the US and countries around the world. Ambassador Lavin argued that in times where acute decisions had to be made, it was impossible not to polarize the world and that leadership was not a popularity contest. While there was a general consensus in the world against the use of force, there was really only one country that was in a position to lead. Therefore, the US should not blow with the wind, but continue to make the decisions that neither the French nor the Germans were able to carry out.

On Singapore-US relations, Ambassador Lavin said that one should not underestimate the importance of and the efforts put into the creation of the Singapore-US FTA. The FTA is still the only agreement of its kind between the US and an Asian country even though agreement with Australia will be in force next year, and agreement with Thailand is in the pipeline.

When asked whether the release of the Osama Bin Laden tape shortly before the election had aided either of the candidates. Ambassador Lavin presented two theories; the pro-Bush theory claimed that the tape reminded the American people of the job that still has to be done. Furthermore, the message from Bin Laden of mutual abstinence from attacking could potentially make the Americans feel safer in the present situation. The pro-Kerry theory highlighted that the tape served as a reminder of Bush's failure to capture Osama Bin Laden, and hence called for a change in leadership. Since no data could prove either of the theories, the Ambassador could give no definite answer on how it has impacted the elections.

Professor Simon Tay asked Ambassador Lavin about the possible legal challenges following the election. The Ambassador answered that legal challenges in general should be seen as a sign of health in a democratic and open society. However, while legal challenge can be expected over a couple hundred of votes, he did not expect such challenges if the margins are much wider as it is likely to be.

In closing, Professor Simon Tay thanked Ambassador Lavin for an enlightening commentary and the organising partners, Jardine Cycle & Carriage, Singapore Exchange and ChannelNews Asia for their support.